

## CONTENTS

*Introduction* vii

1. Striving for Magnanimity 3
2. Being Calm, Thinking Clearly 41
3. Judging Yourself Fairly 95
4. Doing Right by Others 143
5. Being Merciful 193

*Notes* 251

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## HOW TO DO THE RIGHT THING

## I

### STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

Felix qui ad meliora hunc impetum dedit:  
ponet se extra ius dicionemque fortunae;  
secunda temperabit, adversa comminuet.  
(*Epistle* 39.3)

Animi magnitudine, qui numquam maior  
est quam ubi aliena seposuit et fecit sibi  
pacem nihil timendo, fecit sibi divitias nihil  
concupiscendo. (*Epistle* 87.3)

## I

### STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

Happy are those who strive to reach the good: they will have a place beyond fortune's jurisdiction, greeting success with moderation, reducing adversity to insignificance. (*Epistle* 39.3)

The largeness of a mind that is never greater than when it . . . has created peace for itself by fearing nothing, wealth by desiring nothing. (*Epistle* 87.3)

We can begin to understand the connection between fair dealing and being “large-minded” — and the reason why that trait is

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STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

the subject of this book's first chapter—by starting from a trait that is its very opposite. Most people reading this paragraph must have known at least one person they could describe as “small-minded.” Such a person's view of the world is severely limited by their own experience and the lens of the self (“Well, if I could do X, I don't see why [some disfavored person or group] can't do it too”); by their own opinions, to which they cling stubbornly; and by their own goals, which tend to be narrow and self-interested. People like that—petty, fretful, inflexible, intolerant, often vehemently so—seem constitutionally incapable of adopting another person's point of view, or at least pausing to consider it calmly and clearly, and constitutionally incapable of being either critical of themselves or generous toward others. And yet, as we will

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## STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

see, Seneca took clear and calm thinking, critical self-awareness, and generosity to be absolutely central to treating others fairly. That is where the opposite trait—“large-mindedness,” or “magnanimity”—comes in, for it incorporates the ability to be and do all the things that right dealing and fairness require. That is why it is worth getting a clear view of what such “large-mindedness” entails.<sup>1</sup>

According to a standard definition, English “magnanimity” denotes “loftiness of spirit enabling one to bear trouble calmly, to disdain meanness and pettiness, and to display a noble generosity” (Merriam-Webster). That description certainly shares a family relationship with ancient conceptions of “large-mindedness,” including that of the Stoics, who believed that the largest mind—the mind of God—pervaded every



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## STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

nook and cranny of the universe, giving it its providential order, and that it was the proper aim of human beings to try to approximate the God with whom—alone of all creatures—they share the gift of reason.

With that aim in view, in fact, the Stoics granted “magnanimity” a special standing that the definition just quoted only begins to touch. Suppose that you had a mind so capacious and sharp that it always perceived every circumstance with complete accuracy, recognizing it for what it truly was, then evaluated it thoroughly and correctly, decided unerringly what if anything to do about it, planned perfectly whatever it was that needed doing, and provided all the resolve needed to do it. You would indeed have a “large mind,” a perfectly virtuous mind—in fact, the mind of a wise person

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STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

that (as Seneca several times says) differs from the mind of God only in being mortal.<sup>2</sup> Such a mind would provide the grounding for all right behavior by providing a sound view of the world and establishing a sound set of priorities for action. Needless to say, such a mind would always prompt us to treat others fairly; also needless to say, it is a condition of mind that (at most) very, very few actual humans have achieved. So how can we best imagine what it would be like truly to achieve it?

Seneca uses several devices to answer that question and make the all-but-impossible graspable, for example by trying to sketch “the fine and holy sight we’d see” if we could look upon the mind of a wise and good person, or by conjuring up some of the very few historical persons who might seem to have achieved the ideal. In this way

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STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

the passages that follow set a higher bar for virtuous behavior than most of us can clear but also point toward the reachable goals that the subsequent chapters describe.

These first two passages, both from the *Moral Epistles*, stress qualities or principles that recur time and again in all of Seneca's writings: the need to ignore the vagaries of common opinion and look to the permanent truth of nature; the contented and self-contained tranquility that is the hallmark of virtue; the possibility of making progress toward virtue, and the freedom it brings, if you put in the necessary work; and the unity of virtue—the principle that if you are loyal, brave, and pious you are necessarily also generous, prudent, and fair—with “magnanimity looming above all.”

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

(7) Dicam quomodo intellegas sanum: si se ipse contentus est, si confidit sibi, si scit omnia vota mortalium, omnia beneficia quae dantur petunturque, nullum in beata vita habere momentum. Nam cui aliquid accedere potest, id imperfectum est; cui aliquid abscedere potest, id inperpetuum est: cuius perpetua futura laetitia est, is suo gaudeat. . . . Sed haec quoque fortuita tunc delectant cum illa ratio temperavit ac miscuit: haec est quae etiam externa commendet, quorum avidis usus ingratus est. (8) Solebat Attalus hac imagine uti:

Vidisti aliquando canem missa a domino frustra panis aut carnis aperto ore captantem? quidquid recepit protinus integrum devorat et semper ad spem venturi hiat. Idem evenit nobis: quidquid expectantibus fortuna proiecit, id

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

(7) [You can] recognize a mind that is sound if it is content and confident, if it knows that all human desires, all favors granted and sought, have no bearing on the best human life. Whatever can be increased is imperfect, whatever can be lessened is impermanent: a mind that will know unending happiness should rejoice in its own resources. . . . Yet even fortune's gifts are pleasing when reason has blended and balanced them:<sup>3</sup> it is reason that makes them agreeable, while the greedy get no satisfaction from them. (8) Attalus<sup>4</sup> used to use this metaphor:

Have you ever seen a dog, jaws open wide, trying to snatch a bit of bread or meat its master has tossed? Whatever it gets, it immediately swallows whole and is always gaping hopefully for more. We're the same way: whatever



STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

sine ulla voluptate demittimus statim,  
ad rapinam alterius erecti et attoniti.

Hoc sapienti non evenit: plenus est;  
etiam si quid obvenit, secure excipit ac  
reponit; laetitia fruitur maxima, conti-  
nua, sua. (*Epistle* 72.7–8)

(3) Si nobis animum boni viri liceret in-  
spicere, o quam pulchram faciem, quam  
sanctam, quam ex magnifico placidoque  
fulgentem videremus, hinc iustitia, illinc  
fortitudine, hinc temperantia prudenti-  
aque lucentibus! Praeter has frugalitas et  
continentia et tolerantia et liberalitas  
bonum splendorem illi suum adfunde-  
rent. Tunc providentia cum elegantia et  
ex istis magnanimitas eminentissima

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

fortune tosses us as we wait we immediately swallow down without savoring, frantically intent on snatching more.

This does not happen to the wise: whatever comes along they calmly take up and set aside, enjoying a happiness that is very great, unending, all their own. (*Epistle* 72.7–8)

(3) What a fine and holy sight we'd see if we could observe the mind of a good person, its brilliance shining forth from a place of tranquil splendor, with justice and courage, moderation and prudence gleaming on every side, and thrift, too, and self-control, fortitude, and generosity casting their fair light upon it. What glory, what weight and dignity, what gracious authority foresight and scrupulousness

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

quantum, di boni, decoris illi, quantum ponderis gravitatisque adderent! quanta esset cum gratia auctoritas! Nemo illam amabilem qui non simul venerabilem diceret. (4) Si quis viderit hanc faciem altiore fulgentioreque quam cerni inter humana consuevit, nonne velut numinis occursum obstupefactus resistat et ut fas sit vidisse tacitus precetur, tum evocante ipsa vultus benignitate productus adoret ac supplicet. . . . (5) Aderit levabitque, si colere eam voluerimus. Colitur autem non taurorum opimis corporibus contrucidatis sed pia et recta voluntate. (6) Nemo, inquam, non amore eius arderet si nobis illam videre contingeret; nunc enim multa obstrigillant et aciem nostram aut splendore nimio reperiunt aut obscuritate retinent. Sed si, quemadmodum visus oculorum quibusdam medicamentis acui

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

would add, and magnanimity looming above all. Every voice would declare the sight worthy of love and reverence. (4) Any who saw it, loftier and more brilliant than things human beings ordinarily see, would surely stop, stunned as at the appearance of a god, and silently pray that they had not transgressed in seeing it;<sup>5</sup> then led on by the inviting benevolence of its expression, they would bow in worship. . . . (5) [This god] will assist and raise us up, if we are devoted to it, with our devotion expressed not by the slaughtered bodies of choice bulls . . . but by a dutiful and upright will. (6) No one, as I said, would not burn with love, if it were our lot to see it. Now in fact there are many obstructions: our sight is either blinded by too much brilliance or frustrated by darkness. Yet as our

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

solet et repurgari, sic nos aciem animi  
liberare impedimentis voluerimus, po-  
terimus perspicere virtutem. (*Epistle*  
115.3–6)

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

eyesight is often sharpened and made clear by certain medicines, if we willingly free our mind's vision from its impediments, we will be able to see virtue clearly. (*Epistle* 115.3–6)

Seneca knew—and frequently admitted—that he was not wise: he was just one of those trying to make progress toward wisdom, an attempt that was worth making even if the goal could not be reached. But there were a few—vanishingly few—who might be thought to have succeeded and so serve as exemplars for the rest of us. Socrates was probably the consensus choice: insisting that his fellow Athenians question their own beliefs and practices as searchingly as he questioned his own, he became a martyr to the cause of intellectual and moral independence. And for some Romans

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

(27) Si . . . exemplum desideratis, accipite Socraten, perpessicum senem, per omnia aspera iactatum, invictum tamen et paupertate . . . et laboribus, quos militares quoque pertulit. . . . †sivere† aut in bello fuit aut in tyrannide aut in libertate bellis ac tyrannis saeviore. (28) Viginti et septem annis pugnatum est; post finita arma

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

the younger Cato—a contemporary of Cicero and a professed Stoic—was another candidate:<sup>6</sup> after the rivalry of Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great led to the civil war that ended the Republic and set the stage for five centuries of autocratic rule, Cato came to be regarded as a man who rejected factionalism and cared only for freedom, choosing suicide when he could live only by accepting Caesar's clemency and the subservience he thought it implied.

(27) If you want a model, take Socrates, that long-suffering old man, buffeted by every sort of adversity, who was nonetheless unvanquished by poverty . . . and toil, including service endured under arms. . . . [He lived] either in war or under tyranny, or in a freedom crueler than wars and tyrants.<sup>7</sup> (28) The war lasted



STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

triginta tyrannis noxae dedita est civitas, ex quibus plerique inimici erant. Novissime damnatio est sub gravissimis nominibus impleta: obiecta est et religionum violatio et iuventutis corruptela, quam inmittere in deos, in patres, in rem publicam dictus est. Post haec carcer et venenum. Haec usque eo animum Socratis non moverant ut ne vultum quidem moverint. <O> illam mirabilem laudem et singularem! usque ad extremum nec hilariorum quisquam nec tristiorum Socraten vidit; aequalis fuit in tanta inaequalitate fortunae.

(29) Vis alterum exemplum? accipe hunc M. Catonem recentiorum, cum quo et infestius fortuna egit et pertinacius. Cui cum omnibus locis obstitisset, novissime

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

twenty-seven years; after it ended, the state was surrendered like chattel to thirty tyrants, most of them Socrates's enemies. Finally, there is his condemnation on the most serious charges: he was accused of violating religious norms and corrupting the youth, whom he supposedly turned against the gods, their fathers, and the civil community. Prison and poison followed. All this was so far from moving Socrates's mind that it didn't even alter his expression. What wonderful and singular glory, that to the end no one saw Socrates especially elated or downcast: amid such vicissitudes of fortune he was unchanged.

(29) Do you want another model? Take Cato the younger, whom fortune more insistently treated with greater malice. Though fortune had stymied him

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

et in morte, ostendit tamen virum fortem posse invita fortuna vivere, invita mori. . . . (30) Nemo mutatum Catonem totiens mutata re publica vidit; eundem se in omni statu praestitit, in praetura, in repulsa, in accusatione, in provincia, in contione, in exercitu, in morte. Denique in illa rei publicae trepidatione, cum illinc Caesar esset decem legionibus pugnacissimis subnixus, totis exterarum gentium praesidiis, hinc Cn. Pompeius, satis unus adversus omnia, cum alii ad Caesarem inclinarent, alii ad Pompeium, solus Cato fecit aliquas et rei publicae partes. . . . (33) Vides posse homines laborem pati: per medias Africae solitudines pedes duxit exercitum. Vides posse tolerari sitim: in

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

everywhere—finally even in death—he still showed that the brave can spite fortune by living and by dying.<sup>8</sup> . . . (30) No matter how often the Republic changed, no one saw a change in Cato: he showed himself to be the same in every circumstance, in high office or defeat, as prosecutor or provincial commander, in the assembly, in the army, in death. Finally, amid the Republic’s upheaval—with Caesar on one side, supported by ten legions eager for war and allied with all foreign nations, Pompey on the other side, one man ready to face all adversity—as some supported Caesar, others Pompey, Cato alone saw to it that the Republic, too, had a partisan. . . . (33) You see that human beings can endure travail: Cato, on foot, led his army through the midst of the African desert. You see that thirst

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

collibus arentibus sine ullis inpedimentis victi exercitus reliquias trahens inopiam umoris loricated tulit et, quotiens aquae fuerat occasio, novissimus bibit. Vides honorem et notam posse contemni: eodem quo repulsus est die in comitio pila lusit. Vides posse non timeri potentiam superiorum: et Pompeium et Caesarem, quorum nemo alterum offendere audebat nisi ut alterum demereretur, simul provocavit. Vides tam mortem posse contemni quam exilium: et exilium sibi indixit et mortem et interim bellum. (34) Possumus itaque adversus ista tantum habere animi, libeat modo subducere iugo collum. . . . Aurum et argentum et quidquid aliud felices domos onerat

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

can be endured: dragging the remnant of his army, vanquished and without supplies, along the parched hills, he went without water in heavy armor, and, when the chance to drink arose, he drank last. You see that office and distinction can be despised: he played a game of ball on the very day he lost his election.<sup>9</sup> You see that one need not fear those with greater power: though all others dared to offend the one only if doing so secured the other's favor, Cato challenged Pompey and Caesar together. You see that death can be despised as easily as exile: he imposed on himself both exile and death, and in between them war.<sup>10</sup> (34) So we can face such adversities with just as much spirit, once we shake the yoke from our necks. . . . Leave behind gold and silver and whatever else burdens prosperous

STRIVING FOR MAGNANIMITY

relinquatur: non potest gratis constare libertas. Hanc si magno aestimas, omnia parvo aestimanda sunt. (*Epistle* 104.27–30, 33–34)

(7) Ad [Idomenea] Epicurus illam nobilem sententiam scripsit qua hortatur ut Pythoclea locupletem non publica nec ancipiti via faciat. “Si vis” inquit “Pythoclea divitem facere, non pecuniae